



Stacks of room ... Jan Gyrn with one of the modular apartments his company builds in its factory. Photo: Justin McManus

Box sweet box: it's the ultimate flat pack

Marika Dobbins

IT IS a new twist on the Chinese takeaway: cheap factory-built flats that can be stacked to create high-rise blocks.

The modular Chinese flats – which come with kitchen appliances, built-in wardrobes, carpets and fresh paint – will make their Australian debut as part of a development in Melbourne's northern suburbs. The developer, Jack Haber, is poised to ship almost 100 of the flats.

So-called modular construction, where units are built and fit-

ted out on a factory assembly line, was pioneered in Britain for budget hotels, university housing, kit homes and relocatable huts on work sites.

However, prefabricated high-rise buildings have never been seen in Australia and there is a race to build the first, as developers cash in on the Federal Government's housing affordability fund.

The *Herald* has learnt of at least eight such projects in the planning stage. It is estimated they will be up to 40 per cent quicker to build than convention-

al flats and up to half the price, depending on where the units are made.

One local company preparing to manufacture its first high-rise developments is Modscape in Melbourne's west.

The joint owner, Jan Gyrn, said the company was already making low-rise housing. Last month, Modscape raised a penthouse – complete with furniture – on to the roof of a six-storey office building in Wellington Street, East Melbourne.

"I think next year you will see a rush of multi-storey prefabric-

ated apartments," Mr Gyrn said. "Modular construction is one of the only ways some of these projects will get delivered within the time frame."

But he questioned whether the public would support subsidising imported apartments from China. "I have an issue with taking all the labour and componentry offshore. And I'd question the integrity of the product because I believe a container out of China is an inferior product to ours."

Mr Haber stressed that his five-storey block would have the same external appearance as a

conventional building. "They're a full-welded steel box and when they're stacked, become effectively a steel-framed building. The main work on site is lifting the boxes into place and finishing off around them."

The project would meet Australian standards and regulations.

The project in Melbourne is awaiting final approval, the local council having received 90 objections from residents.

Mr Haber said he was yet to decide if the units would be made locally or offshore but did not rule out China as an option.